

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
EB-08 TRSE-00 /074 W
-----031947 232129Z /12

R 231736Z JUN 78
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7499
INFO ALL EC CAPITALS
AMCONSUL BELFAST
AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 10034

USEEC ALSO FOR EMBASSY

USOECD

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PINT PGOV UK
SUBJECT: BRITISH ELECTIONS: OCTOBER 12 IS PROBABLE
ELECTION DATE

REF: LONDON 8555

SUMMARY: AS WE HAVE REPORTED, RECENT EVENTS HAVE MADE
AN AUTUMN GENERAL ELECTION INCREASINGLY PROBABLE.
ALTHOUGH CALLAGHAN WOULD STILL PREFER TO HOLD OFF THE
ELECTION UNTIL THE SPRING OF 1979, AND HAS NOT ENTIRELY
DISCARDED THIS POSSIBILITY, WE BELIEVE IT CONSTITUTES
ONLY A REMOTE CONTINGENCY. HIS PERSONAL STAFF IS
MAKING ALL PREPARATIONS FOR A FALL ELECTION AND BE-
LIEVES THAT OCTOBER 12 IS THE MOST LIKELY POLLING DATE.
OTHER SOURCES IN THE LABOR AND CONSERVATIVE PARTIES
GENERALLY AGREE WITH THAT ASSESSMENT. EVEN THOUGH
CALLAGHAN IS AN UNUSUALLY RESOURCEFUL POLITICIAN AND
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MIGHT STILL PULL SOMETHING OUT OF HIS HAT TO ALLOW HIM
TO CARRY ON UNTIL THE SPRING BEFORE GOING TO THE POLLS,
WE ARE HERewith BEGINNING A SERIES OF REPORTS THAT
WILL ASSUME AN OCTOBER ELECTION AND EXAMINE VARIOUS
ASPECTS OF THE COMING CAMPAIGN. END SUMMARY.

1. RECENT EVENTS SUCH AS THE VOTE OF CONFIDENCE OVER

THE HEALEY CENSURE MOVE, BY-ELECTION RESULTS IN SCOTLAND, PUBLIC OPINION DATA, THE SCHEDULING OF BY-ELECTIONS FOR TWO LABOR SEATS IN THE NORTH AND THE MOVEMENT OF ECONOMIC INDICATORS, HAVE REINFORCED OUR EARLIER ASSESSMENT THAT CALLAGHAN WILL PROBABLY CALL A GENERAL ELECTION THIS FALL (REFTEL). RECENT CONVERSATIONS WITH CALLAGHAN'S CLOSEST POLITICAL ASSOCIATES, LABOR BACKBENCHERS AND PARTY OFFICIALS ALL CONFIRM THIS JUDGMENT, AS DO OUR CONTACTS WITH THE CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL PARTIES. THE DOWNING STREET APPARATUS HAS HAD VARIOUS WORKING PARTIES FORMULATING PROPOSALS FOR LABOR'S MANIFESTO (PLATFORM) FOR THE PAST MONTH, AND THE PACE OF THIS ACTIVITY HAS INCREASED NOTICEABLY IN THE PAST TWO WEEKS. PARTY ORGANIZERS TOO HAVE BEEN BUSY COMPLETING THE SELECTION OF PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES AND OILING LABOR'S CREAKING ELECTION MACHINERY. THE LEVEL OF ACTIVITY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF SMITH SQUARE SEEMS TO HAVE KEPT PACE.

2. THE PRIME MINISTER, NEVERTHELESS, IS KEEPING HIS OPTIONS OPEN. HIS POLITICAL ADVISOR, TOM MCNALLY, RECENTLY TOLD AN EMBOFF THAT CALLAGHAN STILL PREFERS TO WAIT UNTIL THE SPRING OF 1979 BEFORE CALLING AN ELECTION, MAINLY BECAUSE NEWLY PUBLISHED ELECTORAL REGISTERS GIVE LABOR A 2 TO 3 PERCENT ADVANTAGE COMPARED TO A FALL ELECTION. CALLAGHAN IS ALSO "CASTING FLIES
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OVER" THE MINOR PARTIES, BUT THE ONLY ONES SHOWING ANY INTEREST IN THE BAIT ARE THE ULSTER UNIONISTS WHOSE TASTE -- A RETURN OF PROTESTANT POLITICAL ASCENDANCY IN NORTHERN IRELAND -- IS TOO RICH FOR THE GOVERNMENT. CONSEQUENTLY, THE DOWNING STREET AND TRANSPORT HOUSE ORGANIZATIONS ARE PLANNING ON AN OCTOBER POLL, EVEN THOUGH THEY HAVE NOT ENTIRELY DISCOUNTED THE POSSIBILITY CALLAGHAN'S POLITICAL SKILL WILL ALLOW HIM TO HOOK A MINOR PARTY FISH, THUS ALLOWING HIM TO OPEN A NEW SESSION OF PARLIAMENT. IN THIS REGARD, MRS. THATCHER RECENTLY TOLD AN AMERICAN THAT SHE EXPECTS CALLAGHAN WILL TRY TO SOLDIER ON UNTIL SPRING.

3. THE FAVORED DATE FOR A FALL ELECTION, ACCORDING TO MCNALLY (AND VIRTUALLY ALL OTHER LABOR AND CONSERVATIVE SOURCES) IS OCTOBER 12. THIS DATE WOULD ALLOW THE LIBERALS TO HOLD THEIR ANNUAL CONFERENCE SCHEDULED FOR SEPTEMBER 12-16, GIVING THEM THE ADVANTAGE OF EXTENDED MEDIA COVERAGE IN THE PERIOD IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING THE CAMPAIGN. CALLAGHAN HOPES THAT THIS WOULD REVERSE THE LIBERALS' CURRENT LOW POPULAR STANDING, PREVENTING LARGE-SCALE LIBERAL DEFECTIONS TO THE TORIES. THE

OCTOBER 12 DATE WOULD ALSO: GET THE ELECTION OUT OF
THE WAY BEFORE THE MID-OCTOBER PUBLICATION OF MONTHLY
ECONOMIC INDICES (CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IN THE LABOR PARTY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 10034

HOLDS THAT THE PUBLICATION OF ADVERSE BALANCE OF PAY-
MENTS FIGURES JUST BEFORE THE 1970 ELECTION PLAYED A
LARGE PART IN LABOR'S UPSET DEFEAT THAT YEAR); PRE-
CLUDE THE ANNUAL TORY CONFERENCE AND THE ATTENDANT
PUBLICITY; AND AVOID THE LABOR CONFERENCE WHICH IN THE
PAST HAS OFTEN BEEN SERIOUSLY DAMAGING TO THE PARTY'S
POPULAR STANDING. THE CURRENT FALLBACK ELECTION DATE,
AGAIN ACCORDING TO MCNALLY, IS OCTOBER 19. THIS WOULD
BE SUBSEQUENT TO THE PUBLICATION OF MOST OF THE
ECONOMIC INDICES, BUT WOULD RETAIN THE OTHER ADVANTAGES
OF THE OCTOBER 12 DATE.

4. COMMENT: THE RATIONALE FOR A FALL ELECTION WE
DESCRIBED EARLIER (LONDON 2318) REMAINS VALID, AND WE
HAVE NO DIFFICULTY ACCEPTING THE ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF
THE OCTOBER 12 DATE. EVENTS -- PARTICULARLY THE JUNE
CONFIDENCE VOTE -- HAVE MADE IT INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT
TO SEE HOW CALLAGHAN CAN GO INTO A NEW PARLIAMENTARY
SESSION. THAT SAID, WE DO NOT DISMISS THE POSSIBILITY
THAT HE MIGHT BE ABLE TO STRIKE A BARGAIN WITH ONE OF

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THE MINOR PARTIES -- THE PACT WITH THE LIBERALS WAS
UNEXPECTED AND INITIALLY COBBLED TOGETHER IN LESS THAN
48 HOURS. BUT FOR NOW OUR MONEY STAYS ON A FALL ELEC-
TION, PROBABLY ON OCTOBER 12.

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